

When to Say What During Crisis Situations: Experimental Tests of the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) and Stealing Thunder

An-Sofie Claeys (PhD Candidate)

Royal Military Academy

Av. De la Renaissance 30

B-1000 Brussels

Belgium

Tel: 0032 494 26 69 32

Email: an.sofie.claeys@rma.ac.be

Verolien Cauberghe (Promotor)

Ghent University

Korte Meer 7-11

9000 Gent

Belgium

Tel: 0032 472 23 07 87

Email: verolien.cauberghe@ugent.be

Jan Leysen (Co-promotor)

Royal Military Academy

Av. de la Renaissance 30

B-1000 Brussels

Belgium

Tel: 0032 (0)2 742 6460

Email: jan.leysen@rma.ac.be

Abstract

Context & Relevance:

The reputational damage caused by organizational crises can be diminished by the right communication strategy (Benson, 1988). For the last two decades, crisis communication has grown as a field of study (Ulmer, Seeger & Sellnow, 2007), and has been addressed from different scientific domains, making it difficult to oversee the bulk of research that has been conducted. Moreover, research on the effectiveness of communication strategies to restore reputations during crises, is still in its infancy (Hobbs, 1995).

In general, a crisis communication strategy entails two aspects: the message type and the timing. The former is guided by the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT) (Coombs, 2007), the latter by timing strategies (Arpan & Pompper, 2003).

Based on the attribution theory, the SCCT found three clusters of crisis types (victim crises, accidental crises and preventable crises), ranging from no organizational responsibility, to full responsibility (Coombs, 2007). In addition, three groups of crisis response strategies emerged (deny strategies, diminish strategies and rebuild strategies), ranging from defensive to accommodative. The SCCT advises crisis managers to take as much responsibility as they carry for a crisis. Although the SCCT is the first profound attempt to develop a theoretic framework with respect to crisis communication based on empirical results, it is in need of further validation and development. Moreover, the moderating effects of consumers' personality traits on the impact of crisis response strategies on corporate reputation need to be examined.

Equally important as the message content is the timing to disclose negative information to stakeholders. Who should take the initiative to communicate about a crisis? A framework that addresses this aspect of crisis communication is 'stealing thunder' which can be defined as follows: *"When an organization steals thunder, it breaks the news about its own crisis before the crisis is discovered by the media or other interested parties"* (Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005, p. 425). Former studies (e.g., Arpan & Pompper, 2003; Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005; Sawyer, 1973) found a positive effect of stealing thunder on the perceptions about the negative news. There is however some discussion about the underlying mechanism which can explain these results.

The strategy has shown to work through increasing the credibility of the source (Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005; Arpan & Pompper, 2003; Williams, Bourgeois & Croyle, 1993) and through the change of meaning of the disclosed negative evidence in the heads of consumers (Dolnik, Case & Williams, 2003). Other possible explanations derive from the commodity theory (Williams, Bourgeois & Croyle, 1993), the disconfirmation of expectations theory (Eagly, Wood & Chaiken, 1978), the framing hypothesis (Dolnik, Case & Williams, 2003) and the inoculation theory (Easley, Bearden & Teel, 1995).

Room is left to develop the theoretical framework further by investigating the impact of moderating factors. In addition, the different explanations of the effectiveness of stealing thunder indicate that research about the underlying mechanism is strongly advised.

Research questions:

This PhD proposal aims to investigate the general research question how organizations best communicate in crisis situations with respect to the message strategy, and the timing to reveal the negative information about the crisis. More specifically this PhD proposal tries to answer following questions:

- *What is the current status of the scholarly research about crisis communication?*
- *What is the moderating impact of crisis type on the impact of a crisis response strategy on organizational reputation?*
- *Do consumer personality traits moderate the effects of crisis response strategies on organizational reputation?*
- *What is the impact of stealing thunder on organizational reputation?*
- *Do crisis responsibility and credibility of the attack source moderate the impact of stealing thunder on organizational reputation?*
- *Can the guidelines of the SCCT be used to frame stealing thunder and increase its positive effects?*

Methodology:

To get an overview of the existing research and literature in the field of crisis communication, a bibliometric co-citation analysis (Hoffman & Holbrook, 1993) is currently undertaken. In addition, this PhD project proposes 4 experimental studies to examine how crisis communication affects corporate reputation.

Research proposal:**Phase 1: A bibliometric co-citation analysis on the research field of crisis communication**

A bibliometric analysis on the crisis communication literature is currently undertaken. Based on the methodology of Kim & McMillan (2008) a citation analysis will first be conducted to list the most influential works and authors in the field of crisis communication. Next, a co-citation analysis will allow us to explore gaps in the research domain of crisis communication.

Phase 2: Test of the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT)

The SCCT hypothesizes that crisis responses matching the crisis type in terms of responsibility taken for the crisis result in better reputations than mismatched responses (Coombs & Holladay, 1996). To test this hypothesis a 3 (crisis type) x 3 (crisis response) between subjects experiment was conducted among 316 consumers in **experiment 1**. The results showed that preventable crises have the most negative effects on organizational reputation. With respect to the crisis response strategies, the rebuild strategy leads to the most positive organizational reputation. Contrary to the assumption of the SCCT, the interaction effect between crisis type and crisis response strategies on the corporate reputation was not significant. In addition, the study examined the moderating effect of consumers' locus of control on the impact of crisis response strategies. Locus of control

relates to whether an individual has the perception to have power over what happens to him or her (internal locus of control), or attributes it to external factors (external locus of control) (Lefcourt, 1966). The results show that people with an external locus of control prefer the use of deny strategies, more than people with an internal locus of control, since deny strategies lead consumers to believe that a crisis is caused by something in the environment (external attribution).

Phase 3: The moderators of the impact of stealing thunder on organizational reputation

There are reasons to assume that the positive effects stealing thunder has on crisis perceptions (e.g., Arpan & Pompper, 2003) are moderated by a number of variables.

Research on personal attraction in social psychology found that people who are responsible for a negative event and who choose to self-disclose this information early in a conversation, are considered to be more attractive than those who do not steal thunder (Jones & Gordon, 1972). However, if one is not responsible for a bad experience, it is best to wait a while before mentioning the bad news. Whether this mechanism is also applicable to organizations in crisis situations, needs to be studied. In **experiment 2**, a 3 (crisis type: victim, accidental, preventable) x 2 (stealing thunder vs. thunder) between subject factorial design will be conducted. We expect that in case of high responsibility (preventable crisis), stealing thunder will have a more positive effect on organizational reputation than thunder. On the other hand, stealing thunder might have a negative effect when the organization bears no responsibility at all for the event (victim crisis).

The attack source, which discloses a crisis in the thunder condition, is also in need of further study (Easley, Bearden & Teel, 1995). There are many possible sources of attacks with different levels of credibility. Since research showed that stealing thunder improves reputation by increasing the credibility level of the organization under attack (Williams, Bourgeois & Croyle, 1993), it is interesting to investigate if the efficacy of thunder depends on the credibility of the third party. Stealing thunder might be less urgent when the attack source is incredible. **Experiment 3** will apply a 3 (source credibility: high, moderate, low) x 2 (stealing thunder vs. thunder) between subject factorial design to explore the interaction effect between source credibility and timing strategy.

Crisis response strategies (Coombs, 2007) and crisis timing strategies (Arpan & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2005) have not yet been studied together, even though crisis managers need to know what to say at which moment. Crisis response strategies are considered to be reputation restoring strategies and therefore reactive (Coombs, 2007). However, stealing thunder provides an opportunity to use these response strategies in a proactive way. Crisis response strategies in turn, provide the possibility to frame the self-disclosed information in stealing thunder by using the SCCT guidelines to match responses to crisis types. Therefore, **experiment 4** will apply a 3 (matched frame vs. mismatched frame vs. no frame) x 2 (stealing thunder vs. thunder) between subject factorial design to explore the interaction effect between response and timing strategy on organizational reputation.

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